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Source: *History*, Vol. 70, No. 229 (June 1985), pp. 185-201

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24416033>

Accessed: 17-10-2016 20:02 UTC

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THE CONVERSION OF A PAGAN SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE AGES*

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In June 1124 a large and impressive retinue moved slowly through the thick forests separating Poland from Pomerania. In this almost impenetrable landscape the only bearings were provided by the marks which invading Polish armies had cut upon trees in the course of recent campaigns to serve as signposts for the troops. But this retinue in 1124 was not a Polish army. It was led by a German prelate, Otto, bishop of Bamberg, and, although it included both German and Polish soldiers, its composition was strikingly clerical – monks from Otto's monasteries, Polish chaplains and others. This expedition was, in fact, a missionary enterprise, whose goal was the conversion of the pagan Pomeranians to Christianity. In the wake of his conquest of Pomerania, the Polish duke, Boleslaw III, was trying to ensure the religious assimilation as well as the political subjection of his new tributaries.

* Although there has been, and continues to be, debate over the exact dating of, and relationship between, the three *Lives of Otto* which give us our information on the conversion of Pomerania, much of the disagreement is about technicalities and the broad outlines are clear. The earliest *Life* seems to be that written by a monk of Prüfening, a Bavarian monastery founded by Otto. This was probably composed in the early 1140s, only a few years after the missionary-bishop's death. Its author may have been the monastery librarian, Wolfgang, but, since this is not certain, the *Life* is generally known as the *Vita Prieflengensis* or *Prüfening Life*. A second *Life* was composed in the 1150s by Ebo, a monk of St Michael's, Bamberg (the 'Michelsberg'), the monastery which held Otto's tomb. Both the *Prüfening Life* and Ebo's are fairly reliable, being based on the information of eye witnesses, Ebo, indeed, having known Otto. The third *Life*, that of Heribord, another monk of the Michelsberg, written 1158-59, presents rather greater problems of interpretation. It has been clearly shown that Heribord's work is far more literary than the other *Lives*, organized in dialogue form and full of rhetorical devices, and, also, more seriously for the historian, that it is suffused with polemical opinions on contemporary monastic issues. Nevertheless, his account should not be disregarded and can be used, carefully and with controls. On these matters, see J. Petersohn, 'Otto von Bamberg und seine Biographen', *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte*, 43 (1980), pp. 3-27. The *Lives* have been edited a number of times. The earliest scholarly edition was by Rudolf Köpke, *M(onumenta) G(ermaniae) H(istorica), Scriptores*, 12 (Hanover, 1856). He edited an improved version of the text of Heribord in *ibid*, 20 (Hanover, 1868), which was also issued separately, *Scriptores R(erum) G(ermanicarum in usum scholarum)*, 33 (Hanover, 1868). Philip Jaffé edited the *Lives* by Ebo and Heribord in *Monumenta Bambergensia, Bibliotheca rerum Germanicarum*, 5 (Berlin, 1869). The *Vita Prieflengensis* was again edited by Adolf Hofmeister, *Die Prüfener Vita des Bischofs Otto von Bamberg* (Greifswald, 1924). All three works are available in a recent edition by Jan Wikarjak and Kazimierz Liman, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, ns 7 (Warsaw, 1966-74). I have used this edition, citing in the notes by abbreviated title (VP, Ebo, Heribord), book and chapter. A new edition of the *Lives* is under preparation by Jürgen Petersohn for Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt. A partial English translation of the mission narratives of Ebo and Heribord was made by Charles H. Robinson, *The Life of Otto, Apostle of Pomerania*, by Ebo and Heribord (London, 1920). A great deal has been written on Otto of Bamberg, and this is not the place to give a large bibliography. Most relevant titles will be found in the full bibliography in Petersohn (as in note 42). Several articles by Hans-Ulrich Ziegler, which have appeared since then, give a detailed analysis of Otto as a diocesan bishop, 'Bischof Otto I von Bamberg (1102-1139) als Begründer einer neuen Verwaltungsorganisation des Hochstifts', *Berichte des Historischen Vereins zu Bamberg*, 117 (1981), pp. 49-55; 'Das Urkundenwesen der Bischöfe von Bamberg von 1007 bis 1139', *Archiv für Diplomatik*, 27 (1982), pp. 1-110 and 28 (1982).

Over the course of the seven or eight months between June 1124 and February 1125, Otto of Bamberg and his German and Slav helpers undertook an active missionary campaign in Pomerania. They preached, baptised thousands, built rough-hewn churches in the most important centres and, with their imported wine and imported books, celebrated the rites of the Christian faith. Their efforts were not unrewarded, but Christianity in Pomerania was a very tender plant. After the departure of the missionaries, leaving behind them a few priests and a neophyte community, serious apostasy quickly followed. A second missionary expedition by Otto of Bamberg was required in 1128 before a Christian community and an ecclesiastical organisation were permanently established. Despite the vicissitudes of the work of conversion, however, the 1120s represented a decisive decade for Christendom.

At this time, the early twelfth century, Pomerania formed part of the last stronghold of European paganism, the lands around the southern and eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Everywhere else in Europe and the Mediterranean the monotheistic 'religions of the book' – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – predominated. These kindred faiths, spreading from their common Near Eastern homeland, had, over the course of the first millennium or so, reached regions as diverse and distant as Iceland and Spain, Ireland and Russia. By the early twelfth century, although, of course, some pagan practices still survived among the baptised population of Europe, there were only a few regions where a public pagan cult was possible. In the south Russian steppes Eurasian peoples like the Cuman maintained the pagan religion they had brought west with them, but a native European paganism survived only among the Balts and the Slavs of the Baltic basin. Here local, non-literate, polytheistic cults still flourished in the twelfth century.

The reduction of this last pagan bastion was the work of Scandinavian, German and Polish missionaries and crusaders in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In some areas, relatively peaceful conversion took place. In others, like the colonial state of the Teutonic knights, preaching was 'with an iron tongue'.¹ Eventually, with the baptism of the Lithuanian grand-duke, Jagiello, in 1386, official European paganism came to an end. Thus, missionary efforts and the work of conversion form a major aspect of the history of the Baltic region in this period. Otto of Bamberg's missionary journeys of the 1120s, seen in this longer context, were not necessarily the most important stage in that process. They merit the historian's attention, however, because the surviving sources allow us to know so much about them.

The bulk of our knowledge of Otto of Bamberg's mission to Pomerania derives from three accounts of his life written by monks from his monasteries in the 20 years after his death in 1139.² The three *Lives*, part of a great tradition of German episcopal biography, portray Otto not only as a missionary, but also as a vigorous and conscientious prelate, who, by the time of his first mission to Pomerania, had been bishop of Bamberg for over 20 years. It was a dramatic move when he then left the familiar circle of imperial service, synods, the administration of his diocese and the care

¹ A phrase used of Charlemagne's forcible conversion of the Saxons, *Translatio s. Liborii* cap. 5, ed. George Pertz, *MGH, Scriptores*, 4 (Hanover, 1841), p. 151.

² For the sources, and the abbreviations used, see the asterisked initial note.

of his monastic houses to face the uncertainties and danger of 'pilgrimage and preaching'.³ Otto's involvement with Pomerania surprised his contemporaries too:

It is a wonder to many that these people, so distant from the land of the East Franks and the church of Bamberg, nay, rather, isolated from the whole world, had no other baptist and evangelist from the surrounding kingdoms and churches than the bishop of Bamberg.⁴

The explanation lies in Otto's earlier history. Long before his appointment as bishop of Bamberg, he had served as chaplain to Judith, the German wife of Wladislaw Herrmann of Poland. In the years around 1090 he had lived at the Polish court, made the acquaintance of Polish ecclesiastics and aristocrats and become fluent in the Polish language. So, when, many years later, Wladislaw Herrmann's son, Boleslaw III, was looking for a prelate to lead the Pomeranian mission and found his native Polish clergy less than eager, Otto, 'well known and dear to him in his youth',⁵ was, if not a natural, then a comprehensible choice. This was not the only occasion in the medieval period when the Poles showed a willingness to enlist German help in their effort to convert and subdue their pagan neighbours to the north. It was, after all, the invitation of a Polish duke that brought the Teutonic knights into Prussia.

The three *Lives*, together with references in other chronicles, biographies and official documents provide sufficient evidence for an attempt to be made to describe and analyse the conversion of a pagan society in the Middle Ages. It has to be emphasized, however, that we have only one side of the story. All the written evidence comes, by definition, from Christian sources. In other times and places, Christian missionaries or conquerors can be viewed through the eyes of the non-Christian peoples they sought to influence or subjugate – Arabs, Japanese, even Aztecs. European paganism is mute. Archaeology has revealed much of the economic basis of life in early Pomerania and even recovered the shrines and idols,⁶ but there is no substitute for written sources if we wish to understand the complex interplay of power, conviction and habit involved in religious change. In this instance, our knowledge of power, conviction and habit in pagan Pomerania comes entirely from the pens of Christians. This is not a reason to abandon the enterprise, but a warning to be alert to systematic bias and distortion in the evidence.

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³ VP 1.32. The phrase epitomises the mixture of the penitential and the evangelical so characteristic of medieval missionary activity.

⁴ Herbord 2.1.

⁵ Herbord 2.6.

⁶ Thede Palm, *Wendische Kultstätten* (Lund, 1937); Joachim Herrmann, ed., *Die Slawen in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1970), pp. 250-3 and plates 121-4; *ibid*, 'Geistige und kultisch-religiöse Vorstellung der Nordwest-Slaven und ihre Wiederspiegelung in den archäologischen Quellen' in *Das heidnische und christliche Slaventum. Acta II congressus internationalis historiae Slavicae, Annales Instituti Slavici*, 2/1 (Wiesbaden, 1969), pp. 60-74; Wladyslaw Filopowiak, 'Slavische Kultstätten Westpommerns im Lichte archäologische-toponomastischer Untersuchungen', *ibid*, pp. 75-80. For the neighbouring temple of Arkona, see Joachim Herrmann, 'Arkona auf Rügen. Tempelburg und politisches Zentrum der Ranen vom 9. bis 12. Jahrhundert. Ergebnisse der archäologischen Ausgrabungen 1969-71', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie*, 8 (1974), pp. 177-209.

The Pomeranians were a West Slav people, speaking a language close to Polish and Czech. They lived 'along the sea' (*Pomorze*, 'Pomerania') and possessed some thriving maritime centres. Their paganism was certainly not a reflection of economic 'backwardness'. Szczecin (Stettin)⁷ and Wolin (Wollin), on the mouth of the Oder, were major ports. Contemporary accounts and the results of modern archaeology alike confirm the developed urban and commercial nature of these settlements. Artisanal centres, where wood, leather, pottery and amber were worked, shops, coins and planked roads have been uncovered by excavation. With their throngs of craftsmen and merchants, their markets, taverns and temples, their populations of 5,000 and more, these towns were impressive.⁸ It was not absurd for a German chronicler of the 1060s, who had not seen Wolin but knew its reputation, to call it the largest city in the world'.⁹

These towns were dominated by wealthy and powerful men, equally at home in the business of maritime trade or piracy. Individual oligarchs had huge numbers of retainers and dependants and were able, on their own account, to launch freelance piratical raids.¹⁰ Together they exercised a semi-autonomous authority in the trading cities. As a tenth-century Jewish trader observed of them, 'They have no king and permit no one man to rule them, but power is exercised among them by their elders'.¹¹ This breed of urban commercial oligarch still existed at the time of Otto's mission in the 1120s:

Domislaw was the most distinguished man of Szczecin in mind and body, in wealth and noble blood, and was held in such great esteem by all that even Warcislaw, the duke of the Pomeranians, would not presume to do anything without his advice and consent.¹²

The ducal dynasty which existed in Pomerania had a very precarious position. On the one hand, as the passage just cited makes clear, the oligarchs of the maritime 'city republics' severely limited the authority of the dukes. On the other, they had a delicate path to tread in their relations with their new overlords, the dukes of Poland. Nevertheless, the Pomeranian ducal line, of which Warcislaw, mentioned above, was the first known representative, survived to rule the land for another 500 years, until the time of the Thirty Years' War. Their success is to be attributed not only to the cunning way they participated in the complex gavotte of the Baltic

⁷ Pomerania's history means that many of its towns have both a Slav and a German name; I have used names in the form current in the present national boundaries but, on the first mention, have given the pre-war, German form in parentheses for towns now in Poland.

⁸ Hermann Böllnow, *Studien zur Geschichte der pommerschen Burgen und Städte im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (Cologne and Graz, 1964); Karl August Wilde, *Die Bedeutung der Grabung Wolin 1934* (2nd edition, Hamburg, 1953); Lech Leciejewicz, 'Zur Entwicklung des westpommerschen Städtewesens im frühen Mittelalter', in Karl-Heinz Otto and Joachim Herrmann, eds., *Siedlung, Burg and Stadt* (Berlin, 1969), pp. 161-70, *id.* 'Zur Entwicklung von Frühstädten an der südlichen Ostseeküste', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie*, 3 (1969), pp. 182-210; Władysław Filipowiak, 'Die Entwicklung der Stadt Wolin vom 9. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert' in *Vor- und Frühformen der europäischen Stadt im Mittelalter*, eds., Herbert Jankuhn, Walter Schlesinger and Heiko Steuer (2 vols., Göttingen, 1973-74), pp. 190-208.

⁹ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, 2.22, ed., Bernhard Schmiedler, *MGH, SRG* (Hanover and Leipzig, 1971), pp. 79-80.

¹⁰ Ebo 3.2.

¹¹ The account of Ibrahim ibn-Ja'qub, tr. G. Jacob, *Arabische Berichte von Gesandten an germanische Fürstenhöfe aus dem 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1927), p. 14.

¹² Ebo 2.9.

powers, but also to their successful gamble in identifying themselves with a Christian rather than a pagan Pomerania.

The vested interest most clearly involved with the pagan religion was the pagan priesthood. A professional priesthood was a feature of West Slav paganism and there were rewards, both in material terms and in terms of power and status, for members of this sacerdotal caste. No evidence survives of the endowment of pagan temples or the pagan priesthood, although the existence of such endowment is highly plausible, but there is explicit evidence both for the wealth of the temples and for large revenues from offerings and tithes.

The temple buildings were often elaborate:

The chief temple of Szczecin was of wonderfully skilful construction, with carving on the inside and outside. Projecting from the walls were images of men, of birds, of beasts, carved in such a lifelike manner that you would think they breathed and lived. Another remarkable thing was that they had been painted so skilfully that the colours of the carvings on the outside were resistant to storms of snow and rain.¹³

The temple at Gützkow was a recent construction 'of great beauty and wonderful skill', which had cost the inhabitants 300 'talents'. They begged Otto not to destroy it 'but preserve it whole and undamaged for the adornment of the place'.¹⁴ This local pride, expressed in expenditure on beautiful buildings, has an exact parallel in the simultaneous enthusiasm, in Christian Europe, for building churches.

Not only the buildings themselves, but the idols inside them, too, were ornate and expensive. Golden idols, like that of the god Tirglaus (Trzyglow) at Szczecin, golden weapons and golden saddles for the gods, represented a vast concentration of capital in such a society. One side effect of Otto's mission was the release of this capital back into circulation – 'since what was given up to the service of demons was now turned over to the use of men'.¹⁵ The capital accumulated in the buildings, the images and the vessels of the pagan temples was constantly augmented by offerings. Some of these were regulated. For example, a tenth of the spoils of raiding and piracy was offered to Triglaus's temple by the men of Szczecin.¹⁶ Other offerings were voluntary and occasional, such as a coin offered for safe delivery from shipwreck.¹⁷ At Gützkow the idols were offered food and drink daily.¹⁸ Revenues of this kind provided important support for the priesthood and temples of Pomeranian paganism. Even at a very humble level, the offering associated with pagan practices could be vital. On his second mission tour in 1128 Otto very nearly had his head split open by the custodian of a sacred nut tree. This 'poor little man' relied on the tree for his livelihood – not only upon the nuts, presumably, but also upon 'the sacrifices which were offered to demons there'.¹⁹

¹³ Herbold, 2.32.

¹⁴ Ebo 3.9; according to Herbold (3.7), they actually asked that it be turned into a church rather than destroyed.

¹⁵ VP 2.12; see also Herbold 2.31, Ebo 2.13. In this last passage Otto uses gold from pagan cult objects to ransom captives.

¹⁶ VP 2.11.

¹⁷ Ebo 2.13 (here a ploy).

¹⁸ Ebo 3.10.

¹⁹ VP 3.11, Ebo 3.18, Herbold 3.22.

In all these ways a priestly or sub-priestly caste, ranging from the powerful priests of Szczecin to the custodian of the sacred tree, was supported economically and privileged socially through its connection with Pomeranian paganism. Christian missionaries came to destroy those sources of revenue or to divert them to their own purposes and to end the life of this caste. It is not at all surprising that some of the most tenacious and violent opposition came from these 'wicked priests, filled with demons'.²⁰ The hostility which Otto encountered at Wolin in 1124 was inspired 'by the wicked counsel of their priests'.²¹ The apostasy of Szczecin in 1126 or so was engineered by the pagan priests.²² They led attacks on churches, threatened Otto with spears and set ambushes for him.²³ The opposition to the Christian mission was, naturally, led by the men most closely identified with the pagan religion, men who had most to lose from its demise.

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The men of Wolin, who had at first been extremely hostile to Otto's mission, had the ground cut from under their feet by the conversion of the Pomeranian metropolis, Szczecin. They came to Otto to excuse their behaviour and claimed that it was no light thing to change 'the ancient law of our fathers and ancestors'.²⁴ Whatever Otto thought of such a plea of extenuation, the phrase highlights two vital features of Pomeranian paganism – it was ancestral and it was a *lex*. Both qualities gave Pomeranian religion deep roots. As something 'ancestral', it was inherited, defining, and a trust for future generations. As a *lex*, it was more than a system of beliefs or a set of ritual practices (although it was also both those things), it was a code, a set of norms, a way of life.

The clash between the missionaries and their opponents thus continually extended beyond the mere question of cult. The choice between Triglaus and Christ was significant because it represented a decision either to reject or embrace a *nova lex*.²⁵ On the simple level of veneration, pragmatic syncretic solutions were not unknown in Pomerania (as in Szczecin in c1126-28 when 'they served both God and demons'²⁶), but the radical christianisation of Pomerania did imply some fundamental changes. This was recognised by the opponents of change. When the men of Wolin heard of Otto's initial success in Kamien (Kammin), 'they called the men of Kamien feeble betrayers of their country, who had abandoned the laws of their fathers and followed the errors of a foreign people'.²⁷ Here the 'ancestral laws' were explicitly linked with loyalty to the *patria* and hostility to an *extranea gens*. Such equations were frequent. Otto and his companions were branded 'subverters of the country' or 'public enemies of the country'.²⁸ Loyalty to the cult of the gods, loyalty to the *patria* and loyalty to the ancestral way of life were synonymous. There was much in

²⁰ Herbold 3.24 (and elsewhere).

²¹ Ebo 2.7.

²² VP 3.5, Ebo 3.1, Herbold 3.16.

²³ E.g. VP 3.5, Ebo 2.13, 3.16, Herbold 3.18.

²⁴ Ebo 2.11.

²⁵ Ebo 2.5 – or a *nova vanitas* (Herbold 2.23)!

²⁶ Herbold 3.16, VP 3.5, Ebo 3.1.

²⁷ VP 2.5.

²⁸ E.g. VP 3.8, Ebo 2.7, 3.10.

Pomeranian life to reinforce such perceptions. The men of Szczecin, for instance, were used to worshipping, holding serious councils and having their drinking parties in the same buildings – the temples.²⁹

Paganism was thus part of the identity of the Pomeranians. It is not surprising that the God whom Otto brought was 'the German god'.³⁰ For the Pomeranians, loyalty to their own gods and hostility to the gods of other peoples was part of the defence of the *patria*. This was an identification which had been heightened by the parallel but opposite identification which had taken place in Poland, Pomerania's nearest Christian neighbour and bitter enemy. Here the endless war of raid and counter-raid which went on between the Poles and the Pomeranians had been elevated onto the religious plane. In the pages of 'Gallus Anonymus', Poland's first chronicler, writing in the decade just prior to Otto's mission, the terms 'Christians' and 'pagans' are used as common synonyms for 'Poles' and 'Pomeranians', Boleslaw's wars are represented as wars of conversion and Polish military success or good fortune is seen as the work 'not of human but of divine hands'.

To God be praise and honour, the kingdom, the power and the glory...Pomerania is placed under his power...Safety and victory to triumphant Boleslaw. We refer all to the honour of Jesus Christ...Human power has not done this, nor human warfare.³¹

The battering of Polish arms only served to reinforce the bonds between Pomeranian patriotism and Pomeranian paganism. These were bonds that were stronger than any purely political ties. Just as in the case of the neighbouring Liutizi, who had formed a political entity around the shrine of Rethra before bursting upon the Germans in 983,³² the political solidarity of the Pomeranians rested upon common cult and common 'ancient law' more than upon obedience to a dynasty. In the circumstances, a certain ambivalence on the part of the dynasty toward the pagan religion is understandable. Rather than the conversion of the prince leading to the conversion of the people, Warcislaw's conversion had, initially at any rate, weakened his position: 'this barbarous people, who were subject to him, came to hate him because of their hostility to Christianity'.³³

In Pomerania, among the committed protagonists of paganism, loyalty to the *patria* overrode loyalty to the prince. In the face of foreign military pressure, of missions with their foreign gods, of the defection of some of the native rulers, they stood by their gods, their *patria* and their ancient *lex*. The abandonment of the old gods and the ancestral *lex* involved a new

²⁹ Heribord 2.32.

³⁰ Ebo 3.1; for some reflections on this phrase, see Hans-Dietrich Kahl, 'Heidnisches Wendentum und christliche Stammesfürsten. Ein Blick in die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Gentil- und Universalreligion im abendländischen Hochmittelalter', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 44 (1962), pp. 72-119, at pp. 88-95.

³¹ Gallus Anonymus, *Cronica*, 3, 'epilogus', 1 and *passim*, ed., Carolus Maleczynski, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, ns 2 (Cracow, 1952), pp. 123-4, 127.

³² Wolfgang Brüske, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Lutizenbundes* (Münster and Cologne, 1955); Wolfgang H. Fritze, 'Beobachtungen zur Entstehung und Wesen des Lutizenbundes', *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands*, 7 (1958), pp. 1-38; Manfred Hellmann, 'Grundzüge der Verfassungsstruktur der Lutizen', in H. Ludat, ed., *Siedlung und Verfassung der Slaven zwischen Elbe, Saale und Oder* (Giessen, 1960), pp. 103-113.

³³ VP 2.3.

orientation to outside powers and a restructuring of internal relations of power. The birth of a Christian Pomerania, obedient to its duke and subordinate to outside powers, required the destruction of the ancient gentile order. Otto of Bamberg did indeed bring a *nova lex*.

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Rhetorical defence of the 'ancient law of our fathers' was general, exhortatory, non-specific. The actual content and substance of the ancient law, however, consisted of a vast number of specific and normative associations, utterances and acts. Conversion represented a wrench because it meant a reorientation in so many everyday and unreflective habits and responses. Two areas in which this can be illustrated are kinship patterns and perceptions of time.

From an early stage in its history Christianity had embraced and identified itself with a certain family structure and, over the course of the Middle Ages, Christian rules and prescriptions concerning the family were developed and refined. The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a moral crusade designed to enforce the ecclesiastical pattern and definition of the family. In mission areas, like Pomerania, these efforts faced the challenge of distinct, alien and resistant practices. One of the goals of Otto's mission, as he himself saw it, was to bring the Pomeranian family into line with the Christian ideal.

The main problem areas are outlined in the letter Otto wrote (in the third person) in 1125, describing the progress of the mission and his activities:

He ordered them not to kill their daughters, because this crime is very prevalent among them; not to hold their own sons and daughters at baptism, but to seek godparents for them; to show the same loyalty and friendship to their godparents as to their own actual parents. He forbade them to marry their godmothers or their own cousins up to the sixth and seventh generation and told them that each man should be content with only one wife.³⁴

This concisely expressed programme had enormous implications for Pomeranian kinship patterns. An entirely new kinship role – godparenthood – had to be introduced, with its attendant consequences as an impediment to marriage. A new and far more extensive pattern of exogamy was to be introduced. Polygamy was to be abolished. Traditional female infanticide had to be curbed. Both the domestic and the demographic consequences of such a change must have been enormous.

Unfortunately, given the state of the evidence, it is not possible to draw a clear picture of pagan Pomeranian kinship structures. The only relevant information is that provided by the accounts of the mission themselves. Nor is there really any way of assessing the effectiveness of the christianisation of the family structure in the twelfth century. Nevertheless, a few speculations may be allowed. Female infanticide, as practiced by the Pomeranians, clearly had an economic rationale, for 'until this time, if they had several daughters, they would kill some in order to provide for the

³⁴ Otto's letter is found in VP 2.21; Ebo 2.12; Ekkehard of Aura, *Chronica*, ed., Franz-Josef Schmale and Irene Schmale-Ott, *Frutolfs und Ekkehards Chroniken und die anonyme Kaiserchronik* (Darmstadt, 1972), pp. 370-2; *Gesta episcoporum Halberstadiensium*, ed., Ludwig Weiland, *MGH, Scriptores*, 23 (Hanover, 1874), p. 105.

others more easily'.³⁵ Even a slight inhibition of this custom would have demographic consequences, changing the adult sex ratio and increasing the population. The ending of polygamy would probably be less significant, for it is not unlikely that, as in Islamic society, polygamy was a habit of the aristocracy only, that is, a habit of those who could afford to support more than one wife. There is no doubt that such polygamy or multiple concubinage was a practice of the highest ranks of Pomeranian society. Duke Warcislaw himself 'publicly abjured the 24 concubines which, in the pagan way, he had taken as well as his legitimate wife'.³⁶ These 'concubines' would now be in a difficult position, bereft of their recognised status and 'shop soiled' upon the marriage market. Though the demographic impact of the end of polygamy would thus be slight, the domestic upheaval would not. Moreover, if taken seriously, the end of polygamy would fundamentally restructure the aristocratic family. Otto of Bamberg's mission thus involved him in a stark confrontation with established family practices. The powerful Christian instruments of persuasion and control – preaching, catechising and penance – were placed behind the campaign to restructure the family in Pomerania.

Just as the christianisation of Pomerania involved a revolutionary change in family patterns, so it implied a quite new rhythm of time, a distinctive new shape to the week and to the year. Fasting on Fridays, abstention from work on Sundays, observance of saints' feasts and vigils and of the Lenten period were all part of the 'custom of other Christians',³⁷ but required to be introduced and enforced in Pomerania. Paganism had its own rhythms and these had to be negated and replaced. Otherwise old habits might emerge. For example, 'at the very beginning of summer, the men of Wolin used to hold the celebration of a certain idol with a great gathering and with dances...' and even after Otto's mission the purely social function of this gathering continued, with 'games and feasting'. This proved, however, to be the occasion for the revival of pagan cult, when, in the middle of the festivities, images of the gods were brought out from their hiding places.³⁸ Unless the ashes of the old temporal rhythm were scattered, the flame of pagan worship might spring up again.

In these attempts to enforce a new sacral rhythm, the missionaries could hope for direct divine aid. The miraculous punishment of the sacrilegious was one of the more effective deterrents which helped to enforce the observance of holy days. All three of Otto's biographers, for example, tell the story of how a particularly obdurate Pomeranian noblewoman, who insisted on bringing her harvest in on a Sunday, was struck dead.³⁹ But ignoring holy days was part of 'the works of paganism',⁴⁰ and it was not easy to enforce the new rhythms. 'The men of that land were not yet accustomed to observe holy days,' wrote one of Otto's biographers, describing two of these punitive miracles, and he throws some light on the reason why. The priest Boccheus, one of Otto's companions, upbraided a peasant and his wife for working on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin. 'It was a Monday. The peasant said, "Yesterday it was wrong to

³⁵ Herbord 2.33.

³⁶ Herbord 2.22.

³⁷ Otto's letter (as in note 34).

³⁸ Ebo 3.1.

³⁹ VP 2.14, Ebo 2.6, Herbord 2.23.

⁴⁰ VP 3.13.

work because it was a Sunday and again, today, we are ordered not to work. What is this teaching which commands men not to do what is necessary and good? When, then, are we going to get our crops collected? I think you begrudge us our produce!”. The frustration and friction created by the imposition of the Christian year are very clearly expressed here – ‘We cannot make every day a Sunday’, in the words of some other recalcitrant Pomeranians. The argumentative peasant was, not surprisingly, suddenly struck dead: ‘through this the people were taught to show greater reverence for the mother of God and treat the other feast days with greater solemnity’.⁴¹

The targets against which Otto and his helpers directed their campaign – sexual irregularities, lack of reverence for saints’ days and the like – had their parallels in contemporary Christian Europe. Ecclesiastics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries raised their voices against polygamy and marriage within the prohibited degrees among Christians. Virtually identical accounts of vindictive miracles against those who worked on saints’ days can be found in England, France or Germany. The attempt to impose a truly Christian pattern on the *rusticitas* of the baptised population of western Europe must sometimes have seemed as uphill a struggle as Otto’s attempts at overturning Pomeranian family and temporal habits, yet the Pomeranian situation was, in essence, more intractable. The whole world of the Pomeranians – conceptually as well as behaviourally – was imbued with their paganism. They went to work on Sundays because Sundays were not ‘special days’; they took many wives, if they could afford them, for pride and pleasure, with no dissentient priestly voices. For here, unlike in Christian Europe, the ancestral ways of the *patria* had the blessing of the gods.

* * * * *

Despite the obstacles in his path, Otto of Bamberg succeeded. His mission trips of the 1120s laid the foundations for the incorporation of Pomerania into Christendom and the year after his death an independent Pomeranian diocese was established, which eventually became one of the most important ecclesiastical principalities east of the Elbe.⁴² As well as great difficulties, there were forces working in his favour and effectual tactics he could employ.

The first and most obvious tactic was physical violence or the threat of physical violence. A precondition of Otto’s mission had been the conquest of Pomerania by the Polish duke, and the continued possibility of Polish armies entering the land was an important influence on the cause of the mission. Opposition to the Christian missionaries was inhibited by the fear of Polish reprisals. For example, after Otto’s extremely hostile reception at Wolin and Szczecin – he and his companions were manhandled and knocked about – a complaint about this treatment was sent to Boleslaw III and the Polish duke’s messengers arrived in Szczecin with a clear response:

They said that their lord was duly angry when he heard that the bishop had received insults and injuries. He ordered that he should be troubled no further

⁴¹ Herbord 3.29, VP 3.13, Ebo 3.22.

⁴² Jürgen Petersohn, *Der südliche Ostseeraum im kirchlich-politisch Kräfspiel des Reiches, Polens und Dänemarks vom 10. bis 13. Jahrhundert* (Cologne and Vienna, 1979) – henceforth cited ‘Petersohn’ – pp. 262-341.

or else he would come quickly with his army and inflict harsh punishment on them, treating them like a conquered people. But if they were willing to listen to the bishop and receive the word of God, they would suffer nothing from him or his men, but would have perpetual peace, like other Christians, as long as they remained loyal to him and joined him on his military expeditions.

The men of Szczecin gathered to discuss these 'options'. It is a measure of the strength of their convictions that the debate was long before:

they eventually promised that they would do everything they had been commanded to do, as long as they were immune from slaughter, burnings and the other hostilities, the like of which they had often suffered from the duke.⁴³

The extension of Christianity to the peoples living along the Baltic north of Poland was, from the tenth to the early thirteenth centuries, partly governed by the success of Polish arms. The establishment of a first, ephemeral bishopric in Pomerania itself around the year 1000 was a consequence of the temporary conquest of the land by Boleslaw I.⁴⁴ Otto's mission took place under the protection of his descendant, Boleslaw III. In the first decades of the thirteenth century, the mission of bishop Christian to the Prussians was backed up by the military force of the Polish dukes of Cujavia and Masovia.⁴⁵ The most spectacular and well-known wars of conversion in the Baltic world were those of the Teutonic knights but before the German crusading orders arrived in the region, Polish arms had pursued a policy of 'baptism or death'⁴⁶ for centuries. Otto's success in Pomerania has to be understood in the light of this violence.

One difference between Otto's first missionary journey in 1124-25 and his second in 1128 was that, although the threat of force was still important, it was now German arms that were feared. The difference is illustrated by the debate which took place at 'a general assembly of the chief men of the realm' at Usedom. Here duke Warcislaw acted as spokesman for the Christian cause. He described the ill treatment that past missionaries had received and went on:

You ought not and cannot treat my revered lord bishop, whose fame is widespread, in the same way, for he is sent by the pope and dear to our lord the unconquered king Lothar [of Germany]. For he, the very head of the Roman Empire, and all his chief men, reverence Otto as a father and heed his advice in all things. So you can be sure that, if the lord king hears that you have caused any trouble or opposition, he will come straightforward with his army and will destroy you and your land and bring utter extermination. I do not wish to force you to this religion, since, as I have heard my lord bishop say, God does not want forced but willing service. So discuss this issue of your salvation privately, then announce openly how you will receive this most venerable servant of God, your apostle.⁴⁷

⁴³ VP 2.10; see also Herbord 2.30.

⁴⁴ Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, 4.45, ed., Robert Holtzmann, *SRG*, ns (Berlin, 1935), p. 184; Petersohn, pp. 41-5.

⁴⁵ Marian Tümler, *Der Deutsche Orden im Werden, Wachsen und Wirken bis 1400* (Vienna, 1955), pp. 226-32.

⁴⁶ Gallus Anonymus (as in note 31), preface, ed., Maleczynski, p. 7; Herbord 2.5; but see the remarks of Hans-Dietrich Kahl, 'Zum Geist der deutschen Slawenmission des Hochmittelalters' in H. Beumann, ed., *Heidenmission und Kreuzzugsgedanke in der deutschen Ostpolitik des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt, 1963), pp. 156-76; all the articles in this collection are useful for the general context of medieval missionary activity east of the Elbe.

⁴⁷ Ebo 3.6.

Otto came as a preacher, not as a warrior, but there were warriors – the armies of Boleslaw III, the knights of king Lothar – whose potential violence was a force in his favour.

Otto's connections with both the Polish and the German monarchies were thus important because they meant that Pomeranian pagans had to face the prospect of savage reprisals if they mistreated, or even ignored, the missionaries. There was another, less blunt, side to the issue. Otto could not only inspire fear of force; he could also act as a buffer or mediator between the Pomeranians and those threatening outside powers. There was both a carrot and a stick. If the Pomeranians mistreated him then their towns might burn; but if they were baptised, then Otto could protect them. One of the most tangible benefits which might accrue from conversion was the cessation of Polish attacks. In the devastated countryside between Kamien and Kolobrzeg (Kolberg) Otto found all the signs of recent war – corpses, burnt ruins, refugees – and, in this war-wrecked land, was able to further his mission:

Here he baptised many Pomeranians who had hidden in the islands of the sea through fear of duke Boleslaw, but who now returned. For duke Boleslaw was remarkable for his pious behaviour towards God and the servants of God but also for his harsh implacability and proper severity towards idolators and criminals. Every year he used to gather a powerful army and devastate the lands of the pagans, so that they might submit to the yoke of the Christian faith, albeit through fear of the sword. This was achieved through Otto's mission. War was turned into peace. They emerged from their hiding places when the good bishop offered them safety and received the grace of baptism.⁴⁸

Arma in pacem mutata sunt. This was the hagiographer's hopeful conclusion – Otto's mission brought peace. There is some truth in the claim. The peace it brought was transitory, and often only implied holding back threatened war, but, as a confidant and representative of the Polish duke and, to some degree, of the German king, Otto had the capacity to arbitrate and conciliate. He could hold back Polish arms, as in 1128, when Boleslaw planned a reprisal raid into Pomerania. The Pomeranian magnates came to Otto and pleaded:

Father, lord, when we submitted to the yoke of the Christian faith you promised us freedom and certain peace in God's word, but lo!, our Polish brethren [!] are making war on us...

Otto went to Boleslaw's camp and told the Polish duke:

The Pomeranians had begun to be brought into the grace of Christ. He said he had come to deflect the onrush of war from those who had received the peace of God, lest their new flock should be troubled at the very beginning of its faith and go astray.

Boleslaw was hard to persuade, his army grumbled at its lost spoils, but eventually Otto had his way. The newly converted people 'gave thanks for the security of peace which God granted'.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ebo 2.18, VP 2.19, Herbord 2.38; see also duke Warcislaw's words, 'Pacem fert, non arma', Herbord 3.3.

⁴⁹ Ebo 3.13, Herbord 3.10, see also Ebo 3.20.

The conversion of Pomerania did not, of course, in the long run, prevent it from being attacked by Christian powers. Warfare between Christians was endemic in medieval Europe and when Boleslaw promised to treat the Pomeranians 'like other Christians', there was a grim truth latent in his statement. Throughout the twelfth century, and thereafter, Pomerania was invaded and devastated by the Christian rulers of Poland, Denmark and Germany. The religious motive for these wars had gone (although a German crusading army very nearly stormed Szczecin in 1147⁵⁰), but the wars continued. The peace that Otto could offer in the 1120s was, therefore, limited. But he was a powerful figure on the Pomeranian scene, powerful, above all, because he was at the intersection of the interests of a group he had made his own, the Pomeranian converts, and the great powers who surrounded Pomerania. The peace he could provide was a function of the force on which he could call.

It is the potential violence behind Otto's mission which explains some of its actual violence. The wholeheartedness and directness of the missionaries' assault on the temples of the gods would soon have brought an overwhelming reaction from the Pomeranians, had it not been for the reservoir of fear on which they could rely. Given these circumstances, however, there need be no limit to the fierceness and bluntness of the Christian attack on pagan cult. In the Christian view, fierceness was necessary. The missionaries saw amputation as the first step towards curing Pomeranian society of its demonic sickness. A lot had to be cut away before the 'new plantation' could flourish. Otto's companions should be pictured with axes in their hands.

The cuts they wished to make were both horizontal – between the people and the priests – and vertical – between converts and the unconverted. The first task, the crucial incision, was that which severed the priesthood and the public cult from the Pomeranian people. There was a concrete physical side to this. The temples had to be destroyed, the sacred trees cut down, the images of the gods mutilated and burned. This, for instance, is what happened at Gützkow:

There was an idol of astonishing size, carved in an incredibly beautiful way, which many pairs of oxen could scarcely drag along. Its hands and feet were cut off, its eyes gouged out and its nose lopped off. Then it was hauled across a bridge to be burned – what a joyful sight!⁵¹

This gleeful savagery was tactically sound. A thorough attack on organised pagan cult was a very useful first stage in the process of conversion. If the link between cult and people could be forcibly severed for long enough, if exiled priests died, if the rituals were forgotten, then, even if a thorough transformation of Pomeranian habits had not been achieved, at the very least Pomeranian paganism would be decapitated. The people might still have to be won from their blindness and ignorance, but the focus, the official pagan cult, would have been destroyed. The situation, indeed, might resemble that in Christian western Europe.

The missionaries thus aimed at a sharp break. They savoured the radical desacralisation involved in distributing the timber from pagan temples as

⁵⁰ Vincent of Prague, *Annales*, ed., W. Wattenbach, *MGH, Scriptores*, 17 (Hanover, 1861), p. 663.

⁵¹ Ebo 3.10.

firewood, in spitting on the gods.⁵² In the same way they wished to enforce a strict apartheid between the newly converted and the pagan. The decapitation of paganism was followed by cleaving the community into two. This dimension of mission tactics is clearly illustrated by the story of Otto and the Szczecin boys at play:

The bishop told the boys who were baptised to separate themselves from those who were not baptised and to have no further contact with infidels. At his words the Christian boys sent away and repulsed the pagan boys, while the bishop looked on, so that they would not permit them to stand with them.⁵³

The principle of division which the missionaries advanced was intended both to protect the tender faith of the newly converted and to pressurise the unconverted. The separation of the two groups was to be thorough – ‘let them not mix with pagans, nor take food and drink with them or in their vessels’ – and to extend even beyond the circle of the living – ‘let them not bury the Christian dead among the pagan dead, in the woods or the fields, but in cemeteries, as is the universal Christian custom’.⁵⁴

* * * * *

Otto came to woo as well as to frighten. Here he had the advantage of good intelligence reports, for he received advice on the best way of making a favourable impression on the Pomeranians from an earlier, unsuccessful missionary, Bernard. Bernard had gone to Wolin, barefoot and in ragged clothes, to preach the gospel. The Pomeranians had not been impressed. ‘How,’ they asked, ‘can we believe that you are a messenger of the most high god, since he is glorious and filled with all riches and you are contemptible and so poor that you cannot afford shoes?’ They considered Bernard a madman and expelled him. He eventually turned up in Bamberg and discussed the evangelization of the Pomeranians with bishop Otto. He explained:

That foolish people, ignorant of the truth, saw my poverty and the wretchedness of my clothes and thought that I had come there not through love of Christ but because of my own needs. So they disdained to hear the word of salvation from me and sent me away. If you, dear father, wish to make any gains in the brute hearts of these barbarians, you must go there with a noble retinue of companions and servants and a plentiful supply of food and clothing. Those who, with unbridled neck, despised the yoke of humility will bow their necks in reverence for the glory of riches. Be careful not to seek after anything of theirs, but, if they offer anything to you, give them more than you receive. Thus they will understand that you have come as an evangelist not on account of filthy gain but solely for love of God.⁵⁵

The barefoot preacher had learned his lesson. This is shrewd advice on how to win in the game of gift exchange. While the environment of western Europe in the twelfth century was such that dramatic displays of poverty

⁵² VP 2.12, Ebo 2.13, Heribord 2.31.

⁵³ VP 3.9, Heribord 3.19; see the comment of Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (London, 1980), pp. 55-6. The whole of Christiansen’s first chapter forms an excellent sketch of the general context of Otto’s mission.

⁵⁴ Otto’s letter (as in note 34).

⁵⁵ Ebo 2.1.

would have a profound religious impact, the Pomeranians still had a much more continuous set of judgments linking the secular and the divine. For them the criteria of divine favour and worldly success were similar, not paradoxically distinct. The man blessed by the gods would be visibly and tangibly better off. This had implications for their response to Christian missionaries. They would appreciate the tactics of Augustine at Canterbury but not those of Francis at Assisi.

Otto was temperamentally inclined to accept Bernard's advice. He was an ecclesiastical prince, a familiar of the great, famous for his generosity, founder of 20 religious houses, and his mission was undertaken with a fitting grandeur and broadness of resources. The first view of the missionaries that the pagans had would be a long train of waggons, bearing men, provisions, gifts, glittering ornaments and mysterious books. On his second trip in 1128 Otto's train of 30 waggons was mistaken for an enemy army.⁵⁶ He had clearly taken Bernard's advice to heart. His encounters with Pomeranian magnates were marked by gift giving, and he was careful to abstain publicly from taking any of the spoils of the pagan temples.⁵⁷ The impression he wished to convey was that of a disdainful superiority to material considerations.

Otto avoided compromising entanglement in Pomerania because his mission could be supported from outside. Not only the episcopal estates at Bamberg, but the revenues of the Polish duke were at his disposal.⁵⁸ Albert the Bear, the later margrave of Brandenburg, kept an eye on him 'and desired to bring him protection and support if he needed it'.⁵⁹ Otto's mission represented paths of penetration for forces, both material and cultural, from outside. West Slav paganism was becoming increasingly isolated. Christian powers backed Otto and gave him prestige as a representative of that vast outside world, which, even to the Pomeranians, seemed to hem paganism in. During the debate at Usedom:

The party of wiser counsel said that it was incredibly stupid to separate themselves like miscarried children from the lap of Holy Mother Church, when all the provinces of the surrounding nations and the whole Roman world had submitted to the yoke of the Christian faith.⁶⁰

The prestige and the pressure of 'the Roman world' were important in bringing about the conversion. Whatever its strength within Pomerania, paganism was increasingly out on a limb. The magnates at Usedom knew this. The mobilisation of resources by Otto of Bamberg demonstrated it. Perhaps most important of all, it was reflected by the way that, already by the time of Otto's mission, the unity and universality of Pomeranian paganism were breaking down. Everywhere that Otto went he found crypto-Christians, half-Christians and ex-Christians. Duke Warcislaw himself had been baptised in his boyhood, while a captive in German hands.⁶¹ Many of his warriors 'had been Christians earlier, but had exceeded the bounds of Christianity because of their contact with

⁵⁶ Ebo 3.5.

⁵⁷ VP 2.12 provides a good example.

⁵⁸ Herbord 2.9.

⁵⁹ Ebo 3.10, Herbord 3.8.

⁶⁰ Ebo 3.6.

⁶¹ Ebo 3.6.

pagans'.⁶² Domislaw of Szczecin had been baptised in Saxony but had not been able to maintain his faith.⁶³ In Wolin, Otto was helped secretly by Medamir, 'who was esteemed most highly among them for his wealth and power and had been baptised in Saxony earlier and was a clandestine Christian'.⁶⁴ The rulers of Pomeranian society, the warriors, traders and pirates who would have most contact with 'the Roman world', were not resistant to its charms. They adapted to it culturally and ideologically faster than the Pomeranian populace and they provided the first foothold for the mission. The outside world, the Christian world, could batter and threaten, but it could also seduce.

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A final assessment of the conversion of Pomerania in the 1120s must strike a balance between two positions, both with a measure of truth. On the one hand, if we simply look at Pomeranian Christianity at the end of the twelfth century, we might be tempted to exaggerate the limits of Otto's success. Two generations after his mission, one would find that Christianity had the support of the princes and a handful of magnates, that there was a small, if well-rooted, episcopal establishment and that, in a bare handful of monasteries, there were some German and Danish monks. The people were notoriously 'rough and untutored in the ways of the Christian faith'.⁶⁵ 'Something, but not much', might be the verdict. On the other hand, however, some of the results of Otto's mission were enduring. The institutions which he founded and fathered and the liturgies he introduced have direct descendants in the churches and services of the present day. What we have in the 1120s, then, is a partial but permanent conversion.

From his own perspective, Otto of Bamberg might well feel he had done good work. He had brought baptism and the Christian name to thousands. Viewed from the standpoint of a later, more credal or Protestant Christianity, this achievement might seem a superficial one, touching only the outside. But, in the long history of Christianity, there has always been a ritual as well as a credal element: the waters of baptism save men.

Moreover, whether the Pomeranian 'inner man' of the twelfth century was transformed or not, the mission had an important and irreversible consequence – the end of public pagan cult. Even if pagan cult survived in secret, there was no public and communal worship to focus the old religion or a priestly caste to orchestrate it. In these circumstances, the coherence and comprehensiveness of paganism as a system of belief and behaviour must have crumbled. A Christian establishment successfully inserted itself into the position previously held by the pagan priesthood: 'the churches of the Christians now appropriated the sacrifices which used to be offered to

⁶² Herbold 2.21; see also *ibid.* 2.11 and VP 2.3.

⁶³ VP 2.9, Ebo 2.9; see also the story in Herbold 2.27.

⁶⁴ Ebo 2.8, Herbold 2.26. The Vikings, some centuries earlier, had the habit of undergoing a form of baptism when trading abroad in Christian countries, Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (London, 1968), p. 315, n. 1.

⁶⁵ *Pommersches Urkundenbuch*, I, ed., Klaus Conrad (2nd ed, Cologne and Vienna, 1970), p. 118; the documents in this collection form the most important source for Pomeranian history in the second half of the twelfth century, revealing, for example, the very gradual establishment of monasteries in the region; for the semi-pagan reputation of the Pomeranians in the later twelfth century, see also the hostile comments of Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.43.3, ed., J. Olrik and H. Raeder (2 vols, Copenhagen, 1931-57), 1, p. 489.

the priests and temples of the idols'.⁶⁶ Even if christianisation was superficial, paganism was no longer a rival religion in the way it had been up to the 1120s. It was the destruction of this rival that had been Otto of Bamberg's job. He may not have rooted out every vestige of paganism in Pomerania, but he destroyed the public and comprehensive face of the religion of the old gods.*

⁶⁶ *Ebo* 3.1.

* Earlier versions of this article were delivered at Newcastle, Edinburgh and Princeton. I am grateful for the invitations to speak and for the helpful comments and criticisms offered by the audiences on those occasions. Richard Mackenney, John Stephens, Lawrence Stone and my wife, Honora Bartlett, had the kindness to read and comment upon earlier drafts.